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Human security approach for global health

The concept of security has shifted over the past 15 years, and has moved beyond a focus solely on the security of nations to include a focus on the security of individuals and communities.[1] However, it was not until the 1990s that the concept of human security began to take clearer shape after it was reappraised within the UN. In particular, the UN Development Programme's (UNDP) *Human Development Report, 1994* first made the connection between human security and the dual freedoms from fear and want, which were originally outlined in the US Secretary of State's report on the 1945 San Francisco Conference. The UNDP report is also said to be the first document to provide a comprehensive definition of human security, covering economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security.[2]

In practice, the need for an expanded conceptualisation of security was triggered by a series of tragedies around the world. The genocides in Rwanda (1994) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (1995) starkly illustrated to the world that the traditional concept of security as the protection of national borders was not sufficient to save lives in the face of civil conflict. In both cases, national security failed to protect individuals and communities within their own national boundaries, which thus provided justification for expanding the object of security.

To urge the international community in the new millennium to take action on the needs of individuals and communities around the world—in other words, to ensure human security for all—a second influential report was published in 2003 by the Commission on Human Security, co-chaired by Sadako Ogata and Amartya Sen.[3] The refined definition of human security in this report advocated "protecting individuals' and communities' freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom to live in dignity." The report also highlighted ten immediate areas requiring concerted action by the international community, with access to basic health services identified as one priority.

In parallel with the UN's growing interest in human security, Japan has been one of the strongest proponents of the concept. As the generation of Japanese whose pacifism is based on the devastation they experienced first-hand during World War II is nearly gone, Japan needs to develop a new motivation for pacifism. At the same time, Japan is trying to secure its position in an ever-changing world and finding that human security offers a framework for a future-oriented pragmatic pacifism. The evolution of human security into a pillar of Japanese foreign policy thus reflects the country's quest to solidify its position as a global civilian power.

This focus is prompting Japan to expand the pool of actors who are involved in policy making, as is happening around the world. First we saw the common framework transition from bilateral to multilateral diplomacy, and now the framework is being further expanded to include non-governmental organisations and other civil-society networks.[4] This framework allows us to view the community not only as the endpoint of top-down policy making, but also as the starting point for a bottom-up approach to decision making.

The printed journal includes an image merely for illustration

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Funeral ceremony near Srebrenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina

8 years after the Okinawa Summit, Japan is again preparing to host the leaders of the G8 countries, and global health is one of the priorities on the summit agenda. In a speech about global health and Japan's foreign policy, Japanese Foreign Minister Masahiko Koumura stated that human security is "very relevant to cooperation in the 21st century. That is to say, it is vitally important that we not only focus on the health of individuals and protect them, but also strive to empower individuals and communities through health-system strengthening".[5] With this statement, the minister showed Japan's commitment not only to support global health but also to do so through a human security approach. A group at Harvard University has also advocated for global action on health-system strengthening as part of their proposal to the G8 leaders.[6]

Human security approaches have the potential to contribute to improved health for several reasons. First, as a human-centred approach, human security focuses on the actual needs of a community, as identified by the community.[7] Second, human security highlights people's vulnerability and aims to help them to build resilience to current and future threats, and to help them to create an environment in which they can protect their own and their family's health even in the face of other challenges. Third, human security aims to strengthen the interface between protection and empowerment. In the context of public health, a protection approach aims to strengthen institutions in a society to prevent, monitor, and anticipate health threats. On the other hand, an empowerment approach aims to enhance the capacity of individuals and communities to assume responsibility for their own health.[8] Human security also looks at the interface between these two approaches, and encourages those with political and economic power to create an enabling environment for individuals and communities to have more control over their own health.

As we approach the G8 Summit, Japan has the unique responsibility to take a strong leadership role in bringing together the G8 leaders to make a commitment to maintaining and strengthening the international community's focus on global health, not only at the summit but also in the ensuing months and years, so that we can achieve real and sustainable improvements in the health of individuals and communities around the world.

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